GUEST COMMENTARY

Clinton stumbles into minefield over repeal of military ban on gays

By **John Omicinski**

Goose bumps about President-elect Bill Clinton, Hillary the "presidential partner," "Socks" the pussycat and the upcoming neo-Camelot at the White House were just getting started when Clinton jumped out of the blocks with the gays-in-the-service issue.

Clinton's first big move promised "swift" and "firm" action lifting the ban on homosexuals in the armed services.

For months, Candidate Clinton and the media carefully instructed us that the 1992 election was about "the economy, stupid!" Startled, we find that, instead, the first days of the interregnum are about "the gays, stupid!"

For the president-elect, Clinton's handling of the gay issue was like tripping on your tuxedo cuffs while walking up the church steps to a wedding ceremony.

For voters, it was akin to the "bait-and-switch" technique warned against by consumer activists. That's where you go into a store to buy a toaster advertised at the special price of $14.95 and instead emerge stupidly with a six-slice beauty, with special attachments, for $49.50.

The word "inauspicious" comes to mind.

After waging a campaign relentlessly and cleverly focused on the economy and the broad middle class, Clinton's promise to lift the gay ban marked a return to the banal, pandering politics of payback. Paul Tsongas's characterization of Clinton as "The Pander Bear" wafted up from memory.

The gay flap already is bleeding some of the gas out of Clinton's presidential balloon. It's not a strong beginning for a man who comes in with the approval of only 23.3 percent of the American citizens over 18, lowest since President John Quincy Adams.

Sen. Bob Dole's prediction that a Clinton executive order on the gays would "blow the lid off the Capitol" is a tad hyperbolic, but the Republican leader's general assessment is accurate.

The gay flap is a sign that Clinton's presidential theories may run athwart life inside the D.C. political hothouse and the average American family.

Having never served — Oxford-educated Clinton evaded the Army draft while writing that he "loathed" the military — the president-elect surely doesn't understand how different military life really is.

Life in the armed services involves an enforced closeness that can be companionable but stifling. There is a need for discipline that often looks foolish but is a matter of life and death. There is a logical requirement for uniformity that doesn't jibe with any civilian notions.

To its credit, the military comes out of this hassle looking good. Army Gen. Colin Powell, the Pentagon's top officer, said Wednesday that he accepted the eventual outcome, explaining that "... It's a judgment that will have to be made, and appropriately so in our system, by our civilian political leaders ... We will do what we are told to do," he told an audience in Arlington, Va.

Clinton's decision to choose — or perhaps stumble into — the ground of gay military rights for the opening skirmish of his presidency demonstrated either arrogance or naivete.

Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. Sam Nunn, Dole and other Hill leaders arrayed themselves against the president-elect. This was NOT a way to get things started.

Sooner or later, the president-elect will have to back off and hide behind a commission, a study group, a special panel — anything with a fancy name that can give him political cover.

On the other hand, the idealists in his entourage will want him to go into the pit and fight it out. Either way, it's likely to be a lose-lose issue for Billy the Kid.

Press reports say that Clinton's aides are "disturbed" by the gays-in-the-barracks contretemps. Behind the scenes, the president-elect may be praying for a Bulgarian invasion of Turkey. Anything to get the gay issue off the front pages.

No matter how it comes out, the gay-ban issue will raise new questions about Clinton's presidential character, style and leadership abilities.

Omicinski is a columnist gor Gannett News Service.

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